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Uruguay

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Special Edition - disP – The Planning Review

State-of-the-art of Planning and Planning Education in Latin America

1. What is the present status of planning (be it urban and regional or spatial and environmental) in politics and in the society of your country?

Uruguay has seen significant transformation on national approaches to planning through legislation and guidance in the past 15 years, which are rooted in a discourse promoting integration of social and political processes in the development of planning policies. In addition, planning strategies have increasingly drawn attention to socio-economic processes as well as sustainability at a national level, when at the same time considering specific local needs (DINOT, 1997¹). Ideas reflecting the inclusion of social and economic dimensions on planning and development in Uruguay emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, however it was not until the end of the 1990s when these were fully embedded in political agendas. However, this strategic approach does not always drive urban transformation, which is currently rooted on economic growth resulting from the mobility of national and international capital and remains mostly unplanned. In this context spatial planning is not the result of a systematic approach and physical changes in the territory tend to be the result of public and private initiatives that respond to market shifts and political agendas of a specific government period.

With regards to countryside areas, industrial changes are substituting cattle rising over natural fields production (i.e. eucalyptus and soya), which is causing the expulsion of rural population towards the urban peripheries. Many small communities disappeared in the last twenty years due to that modern agriculture techniques do not require labour force and there is an increasing dependency on foreign technologies and products for agriculture (transgenic seeds, agrochemicals, agricultural machinery). These industrial changes have also contributed to increasing environmental concerns with higher levels of contamination in water bodies, land erosion and increasing slum areas and violence due to social displacement and mobility (Viana, 2014²).

It has been highlighted for future action the importance of building capacity among politicians and experts to understand and drive the planning processes, with the higher education academy

¹ The National Department for Territorial development (DINOT) undertook in the 1990s an exercise based on diagnosis, priorities and future objectives for different regions in the country in order to identify regional strategies and at the same time common references.

² Isabel Viana (2014) *Uruguay Summary Country Information*

identified as the main actor with a role to contribute to this (Bervejillo, 2014³). Increasing participatory mechanisms should be embedded within the planning process which would allow for a closer collaboration between government and society at national and local levels. Better coordination across public administrations and private sector would contribute to the development of a framework that includes planning and development instruments as well as procedures. The latter should also contribute to the development of an approach that considers both national strategies and the transfer of power to local actors, in decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

2. Which themes dominate the discourse about planning in your country? Do national media (newspapers, television) report on these planning challenges?

Uruguay is characterised by slow population growth which generates more emphasis on the importance of inter-urban migration than in the growth of urban centres. With regards to national discourses, one of the main characteristics of the past ten years has been an increasing involvement of all departmental sectors of the country in the development of national planning strategies through the DINOT, the national Office for territorial development, which sits within the National Ministry for Housing. However, a weaker link can be observed between this generally recognised political interest in planning the territory and the actual emerging policies, which do not tend to engage with a thorough approach to re-enforcing urban systems and regions in the country.

Looking at current policies addressing production and economic development, a clear weakness is evident in relation to how these policies consider the urban system as a whole. A general understanding of productive regions is present, where considerations are given to environmental and infrastructural aspects, however cities and urban regions are not integral to development strategies (Bervejillo, 2014). As a result, productivity and urban development are disconnected and often take parallel paths, particularly in relation to the capital city Montevideo, in which east and west expansion is linked to a mix between services provision, small industries and housing.

With regards to approaches to planning, key for rural areas has been the introduction of sustainable development strategies and policies, which include regulation to minimise water and land contamination, as well as flora and fauna protection in the context of growing intensive agriculture, cattle rising, metal mining as well as new global scale industries, such as the cellulose industry. However, government strategies appear to be careful in the development and implementation of environmental protection policies in the context of the interest for growing economic investment in the country. Beyond national political discourse, sustainable awareness tends to be rooted on actions led by NGOs and activist communities, which tend to attract national media. In addition to issues related to political confrontation and environmental concerns, media in Uruguay shows higher awareness of indicators for economic development at local and regional levels, such as the international positioning of the capital city in the world-wide range of 'emergent cities' with the capacity to engage in a speedy economic growth in the near future (El Pais Newspaper, 2017⁴).

³ Bervejillo (2014) *Desafíos Urbanos y Territoriales para la Construcción del Uruguay Futuro*

⁴ <http://www.elpais.com.uy/economia/noticias/campeonas-emergentes-montevideo-consultora-euromonitor.html>

Recent interest across political discourse and media has been dedicated to the revision of current social housing policy⁵, with an increasing the role of the private sector in the provision of housing, including rental housing. Across the country private developers have also been involved in policies that are aimed to the completion of unfinished real estate projects (mostly partly funded by the National Housing Bank) to be destined to social housing.

3. Is the gap between theory and practice in planning growing in your country? Which role does English literature play in this discourse?

The gap between theory and practice in Uruguay is very significant with an even larger gap between the political and technical culture, which have integrated some current theoretical approaches, but questions remain on how these have been incorporated to government and administration. In the theoretical discourse, the past twenty years have seen: growing decentralisation of local administration with increasing interest on participatory mechanisms for civil society to input planning and development; a growing interest in understanding the territory as a whole in the development of policies and projects; and an increasing compromise from the national government in the development of a legal framework for planning (Bervejillo, 2014). However, practice tends to be rooted on a top-down approach, which appears reactive to changing economic conditions and private investment.

With regards to Environmental Science and Sustainability, this discipline is taught at higher education level in Uruguay but there are significant gaps in teaching environmental management (Viana, 2014). In addition, environmental policies do not appear to consider all aspects towards a sustainable approach to territorial development and growth, where social, natural and economic resources are included in planning and regulation.

The planning discourse tends to offer more emphasis on governance mechanisms; the development of specific policy, such as environmental policy and social integration or the definition of priorities and agendas at all government levels. Overall, there is little consideration of quality of life of citizens, urban design strategies or place-making within this approach.

4. To which extent do planners in your country address growing social, economic and spatial disparities, and do they believe that spatial planning could contribute to reduce such disparities?

Although some of the themes of the most recent Law 18308 in Uruguay on Territorial Planning and Sustainable Development from 2009 had emerged at the end of the 1960s, these were then mostly related to technical and programmatic aspects of planning. The 2008 Law established a new administrative structure for national, departmental and local planning, defining competences and instruments for accomplishing the government objectives, as well as new planning procedures (Law 18.308a, 2013⁶). Significantly, two administrative departments were created in

⁵ Law 18.795 Social Interest Housing (Vivienda de Interés Social, VIS)

⁶ Law 18.308 (2008) revised in 2013, National Guidance for territorial land use and sustainable development, Representatives Camera, Uruguayan Government.

2013 Planning and Environment (acting at national level) and Territorial Information (including planning statistics and territory monitoring). Main objectives of this Law include the integration of territorial planning with sustainable development, which considers social equity as well as the preservation of natural resources. The implementation of this Law is structured around National Directives and Regional Strategies, which consider the nature of rural, urban and sub-urban land.

Within this political and regulatory context, there is a significant difference between rural and urban areas, with the main concentration of population in the expanding capital city Montevideo. Private sector has led urban transformation in the 1990s and early 2000, which is characterized by land use changes with increasing vacant areas due to continued de-industrialisation processes, underuse of existing infrastructures, and at the same time increasing demands for the expansion of road (and public transport) networks towards peripheral and slum areas. This was accompanied by the emergence of new ‘centralities’ in central and along the coastal edge of the country, most of which is occupied by low and medium-income sectors of society. These areas have continued to create a sense of exclusion and gentrification. In general, Uruguay planning practice does not include participatory mechanisms in the development of urban or land use plans, which are undertaken by professionals in Departmental legislative administrations. Therefore, considerations of social, economic and spatial disparities do not dominate understanding among practitioners in planning.

5. Are planning students adequately prepared to pro-actively address future challenges in planning in your country? Should planning education return to schools of architecture or rather be offered in schools of geography?

Urban planning is taught at the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism, University of the Republic in Montevideo, where urban studies are embedded within the five years of education. The Institute of Theory and Urbanism has, in the past few years, launched a Master degree on Planning and Urban Development, which has been the main training programme on this area in Uruguay. The Master is taught with an approach rooted on both conceptual discussion and practical application, which is usually related to the development of policy and plans for areas in the country. Although sociology and geography are disciplines embedded within the course, there is currently no interest for this to be offered within different disciplinary areas.

The past ten years have seen in Uruguay the emergence of a series of in-depth territorial studies commissioned by public institutions, which include academic and private consultancy reports. These generated a significant increase on knowledge and information about the development capacity and specialisation of the territory and indicated the basis for the development of policies for ‘productive territorial development with social inclusion’ (MVOTMA, 2016)⁷. It is significant to highlight that these studies represent the most comprehensive knowledge-base for planning and development, created in the country, however they have not been fully translated into policy yet.

6. To what extent is spatial planning knowledge transferred or exchanged between your

⁷ MVOTMA Report for UN Habitat III Quito Ministry for Territorial Development and Sustainability, *Informe Nacional de Uruguay*

country and other Latin American countries, (including planning instruments, policies, concepts, etc.)

The past fifteen years have seen the development of national visions and strategies for planning with increasing links between political agendas and development policies including economic development and infrastructures. This is evident in a series of planning policy and guidance, which, through emphasising different priorities, they represent a shift to considering territorial planning at a national scale. These strategies may be reflecting experiences in other Latin American countries and beyond. Moreover, invited speakers include international experts such as Jan Gehl, who visited Uruguay in 2015.⁸

Experiences of other Latin American cities related to successful transport strategies such as in Bogota or Medellin, have been considered in political discourse, but have not been translated into practice. It is often the case that transfer of knowledge between Latin American countries does not always consider the specific situation and context of each place and ideas are transferred without consideration of the need for re-contextualisation of experiences, due to that what works in one place may not work in others.

Short biography

Dr Maria Soledad Garcia Ferrari is a Senior Lecturer at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Edinburgh. Professionally qualified in Architecture and Urbanism in Uruguay, her research focuses on current processes of urban development and regeneration in Latin America and Europe, with particular interest on waterfront areas. She is currently leading a collaborative research project focused on assessing innovative urban strategies in the city of Medellin <http://www.medellin-urban-innovation.eca.ed.ac.uk>. Dr Garcia Ferrari taught in the Faculty of Architecture in Montevideo, the University of Seville and has been invited speaker to the School of Architecture, CEU San Pablo University in Madrid. She worked for the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland on the development of this organisation's research strategy and the architectural profession engagement with knowledge exchange. Dr Garcia Ferrari is currently International Dean for Latin America for the University of Edinburgh and Director of the University's Centre for Contemporary Latin American Studies.

⁸ <http://www.montevideo.gub.uy/institucional/noticias/montevideo-implementara-metodologia-gehl-de-urbanismo>